

Nunc Stans

by Marc R. Johnson

He was lying on his side taking in his breath in short sporadic heaves. His shoulder rose sharply as his lungs pulled in what they could and gently fell when they couldn't hold it in any longer. Between each of the breaths that he struggled so hard for was a pause that seemed to grow longer and longer as each moment passed.

I inhaled deeply to remind myself that I was still alive, but the air didn't satisfy me. It was too dull and too stale. I ached for arctic air, something to invigorate me and to impress on me the sense of my blood being filled with the elements that would keep me moving. Instead, I was surrounded by the stagnant air that fills a room when something knows that it's about to die. My ears twitched as they picked up his wheezing, subtle as wind pushing through a window that had been left cracked open but still profound enough to haunt the dreamer and keep him from a peaceful rest. I wanted to put my hand on his shoulder and comfort him with warmth, but I didn't think it was appropriate. He never liked to be touched.

For a moment, I thought that he had stopped breathing. As I held my breath, I listened closely to the silence that had suddenly occupied the room, inhabiting the air and leaving it thick. I even thought that I could hear his heart slowing, but, when his breath suddenly returned to him, I realized that I was wrong. Maybe it had never left him in the first place. Maybe I had just missed it.

Walking closer to his bed, I tried to think of something to say. Nothing came to me as I convinced myself that all he wanted to hear was silence anyway. I couldn't imagine anyone would want to hear a comforting word at this moment. When everything else is leaving you, there could be nothing worse than having to hear some bastard rambling on about how it's fine to just let go, that everything would be all right. Who cares about everything when it's about to leave you behind?

The drapes were drawn, leaving the room a black void where gentle sounds were the only things that could bring an image to the mind. I could only think that he needed some image to keep fixed on. Black wouldn't do it; it would leave him only able to concentrate on the echoes of his breath slowly leaving him. I pulled the drapes aside and found the failing glow behind it with a dark horizon where the last of the day's fading light penetrates hardest before it dies. No matter how beautiful it looks, it's never as lovely as the twilight before.

Looking to the pale blue irises peeking through the slits of his eyelids, barely open to the lovely thing in front of them, I could tell that he knew what was going to happen. That was when my throat started to swell, and my eyes puffed up. I took in a sharp deep breath, and, when I did, his arms moved gravely toward me. His guise didn't change, but the movement in his arms told me that he wanted to touch something, to feel something else besides the heat fleeing from his body. Sitting on his bed, I laid my head down and wrapped my arms around him.

The remaining light of the day left us as the hours crept. It wasn't surprising that he wasn't done yet; he would never give up easily. Even when parts of his body had started to deteriorate, leaving him disfigured, he still moved about, catering to himself, dealing with the burdens that had compounded themselves on him. I thought that I might fall asleep next to him, still holding him, but I couldn't. My breath came too easy for me. It shouldn't have been that easy for me, not when he struggled so hard for every one of his. Every time he exhaled, I thought that it was over. I hoped that it was over. Then, he could finally rest, and he wouldn't be burdened with labored breath anymore.

But he breathed again. I thought the sound of it would be more grotesque, a gurgle or a whine as the air entered his failing lungs, but it wasn't. Although a burden, it came in smooth and unabated. If he was going through something horribly painful, he was the only one who could notice. I wanted to think that he might've found some mode of meditation that eludes the rest of us, that he only needed to

breathe once for every of our six, but I was being a fool. No matter how peaceful he seemed, anyone could clearly see that this was a dying thing lying in front of them, a thing not long for anything else that time had to offer. A moment would soon be gone for him. It would be gone for me too; his moment would leave me just as it was about to leave him. I knew I would try to go back to it, but, either in waiting or remembering, wanting or reflection, that moment is still too far away or too far gone for anyone to keep. I missed the cadence and remembered the verse too late. Now, that place where everything comes together is a first taste of things that have somehow become slightly bitter, and I was choking on it.

I wanted to smother him and end it. My weight was already on him. All I had to do was push a little harder and add to his burden. Then, he would stop. What a merciful thing to help end torment and pain, to bring peace. Redistributing my weight on his side, I put more pressure on him. He started to wheeze and whimper, almost squeaking, like a little creature that wasn't sure what was happening to him but just wanted it to stop. I fell off of him, weeping hard, drooling and unable to close my mouth. I couldn't end it for him. I tried to say that I wasn't brave enough, but I knew that I just wanted to end him for me, not for him. I told myself that I should just let these things happen. Let death be. Let the moment go and let the now go with it. The now is always fleeting and never abiding anyway. A new moment came but passed away too quickly for notice, and no matter how hard I tried to hold it close, holding my breath for it, I had missed it entirely.

